

### Identity, Collective Memory and Antisemitism

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## ***PRESERVING IDENTITY***

### **IDENTITY, COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND ANTI-SEMITISM**

**PETER DAN**

**Abstract.** There is an ongoing right-wing populist revolution in Western democratic societies. Revolution is by definition a period of upheaval. The premise of this paper is that the right-wing populist regimes try to find a level of stability by doubling down on the antiestablishment resentment, authoritarianism and nativism which characterize them. This is achieved through the manipulation of collective identity and collective memory. The present paper analyses the manner in which populist politics are validated, maintained and reinforced by modifying collective memory. For the purpose of this paper, collective memory will be considered as a group identity narrative, a consensual convention which allows for the integration of recalled events in a manner consistent with it and the rejection of events not consistent with it. The increased emphasis on nationalism affects both collective identity and collective memory, leading to the repositioning of the Overton window and causing the re-emergence of previously unacceptable antisemitic attitudes. The present revival of antisemitism is seen as the necessary consequence of the changes caused by the shift toward right-wing populism and authoritarianism.

**Keywords:** Collective identity; collective memory; populism; anti-Semitism; Overton window.

### **Individual Identity, Group Identity and Collective Memory**

We are in the midst of a rightist populist surge in most of the Western democracies. The causes include perceived threats to national and cultural identity, national independence, a weakening of the concept of nation state with its “inviolable borders” and a general dissatisfaction accompanied by a feeling of being wronged and losing control. From a social psychological standpoint, at the individual and

small group level, the social trends named above are mediated and integrated by using the constructs of collective identity and collective memory. This is the perspective of the present paper, which continues my efforts to propose a framework integrating the individual, small group and societal levels. In previous papers I tried to explore the neuropsychology, evolutionary psychology and dynamic psychology connections of processes such as antisemitism, group identity and collective memory. The reason is my abiding belief that an explanation of these processes has to be consistent both within each level and across levels, and the present paper continues this perspective.

Mudde (2013) has identified three essential characteristics shared by all populist philosophies: anti-establishment animus, authoritarianism and nativism. Those are the necessary components; specific populist movements may differ in many other respects. This tendency can be traced back, at least in part, to the decreasing attachment to democratic values, as demonstrated by the work of Foa and Mounk (2016): the fundamental beliefs regarding the importance of democratic values are weakening all over Europe and in the US.

In fact, democracies seem to decay toward one of two solutions: “illiberal democracy” in which the will of the majority loosely determines public policy but individual rights are regularly violated (as for instance in Hungary) or “undemocratic liberalism” in which individual rights are respected but the mechanism for translating the will of the people into public policy has broken down (as for instance in those European countries where the majority opposition to admitting new refugees is overlooked.) Populism naturally fills the void left by the weakening commitment to democratic values.

Barber (1996) has described two “axial principles” of our age: tribalism and globalism, two forces in conflict he named “McWorld” and “Jihad”. The former represents a centripetal force for transnational and cross-cultural homogenization and integration, and tends to occur more in open societies while the latter is a centrifugal force for fragmentation, separatism and tribalism, occurring more often in closed societies, often based on national or religious identity.

If Foa and Mounk’s suppositions are correct, in rich countries the increased tendency to fragmentation, isolationism and tribalism results

in a shift from “Undemocratic Liberalism” toward “Illiberal Democracy,” which then further decays into authoritarianism. When one adds the strong nationalist component, the resulting trend is toward right-wing populism.

Redfield (1953) identified two of the essential dichotomies by which we structure our world: “Me/Non Me” and “We/They.” The individual sense of identity is the decision criterion for the first dichotomy. Group identity is the criterion for the second one.

We evolved in small groups of hunter-gatherers and sociality (Wilson, 2012) is the key of our evolutionary success. The necessary social cohesion within the group was enhanced by the emergence of a common frame of reference. The development of language allowed the sharing of mental imagery, which in turn led to the emergence of storytelling and to the invention of myths of creation. The myths played an essential role in structuring the universe into realms, (this world and the spirit world, this realm and the one beyond) and in the emergence of ideas about transcendence, mortality and immortality.

The different aspects of reality were integrated by incorporation in the same overarching universe of meaning, which Berger and Luckman (1966) named the symbolic universe.

The evolutionary role of the formation of symbolic universes is to enhance group cohesion. Together with the development of cortical structures in the frontal cortex which control and regulate social behavior, proto-morality – a set of rules promoting the altruistic behaviors which foster group survival – is being internalized by the members of the group. The emergence of collective identity is a consequence of belonging to the same symbolic universe. Collective memory is at the group level what the narrative of the self is at individual level.

According to Erikson (1994), identity is a state of self-sameness and continuity, integrated both longitudinally (historically) over the life cycle, and horizontally across situations. Identity is internally consistent, and it is validated through interactions with others. It provides the point of view of the “I”, the perspective from which we observe the world. The sense of identity is present in all our activities, it is the basis on which we decide the relevance of all our experiences, and information related to it is embedded in all our memories. The sense of self is our longest permanently running mental process, and it exerts a permanent

influence over all our conscious decisions, yet an overwhelming proportion of it is taking place outside our awareness. We are not aware of how and when the sense of identity is generated or of how the sense of self is maintained.

One of the paradoxes of individual identity is that it is an integrated conglomerate of a multitude of shared collective identities. This quality is similar to recursiveness in linguistics: one can identify as a Romanian of Greek Orthodox religious affiliation, who is Transylvanian, living in Bucharest, speaker of French, a theater lover, who is a fan of a given soccer team and loves red wine etc. Collective memory also has a kaleidoscopic quality: depending on the situation, any of these collective identities may be perceived as the salient one. As Todorov writes, "individual identity stems from the encounter of multiple collective identities within one and the same person; each of our various affiliations contributes to the formation of the unique creature that we are. Human beings are not all similar, or entirely different; they are all plural within themselves, and share their constitutive traits with very varied groups, combining them in an individual way. Individual identity results from the interweaving of several collective identities." (2010, p. 21) I believe that Todorov is correct and that he described an intrapsychic structure with a very special property: the individual and social elements are so intertwined that it is impossible to separate them. This is like Freud's "complex concatenation," which indicates a superposition of different levels of motivation or interpretations of reality, or to Lacan's signifying chain: "links by which a necklace firmly hooks onto a link of another necklace made of links" (2002, p. 145). The role of this type of structure is to provide the connection between the individual and group levels, and to ensure its continuity. We can find this type of structure in individual and collective identity, in collective memory and in morality. At the individual level, collective identity, be it group, ethnic, religious, ideological or national (or combinations of the above) is part of individual identity. Conversely, at the group level, collective identity is a conglomerate of individual identities. As the individual matures, the individual and social components become more interwoven. Different components become salient depending on the situation.

The maintenance of identity be it individual or collective can be described as a flow: the evaluation process is continuous and iterative; with the result at moment “n” becoming a component of the input for the evaluation at moment “n + 1” when a new situation warrants it. In effect, whenever an individual or group is confronted with a new event, a decision has to be made as to whether to incorporate it in the narrative.

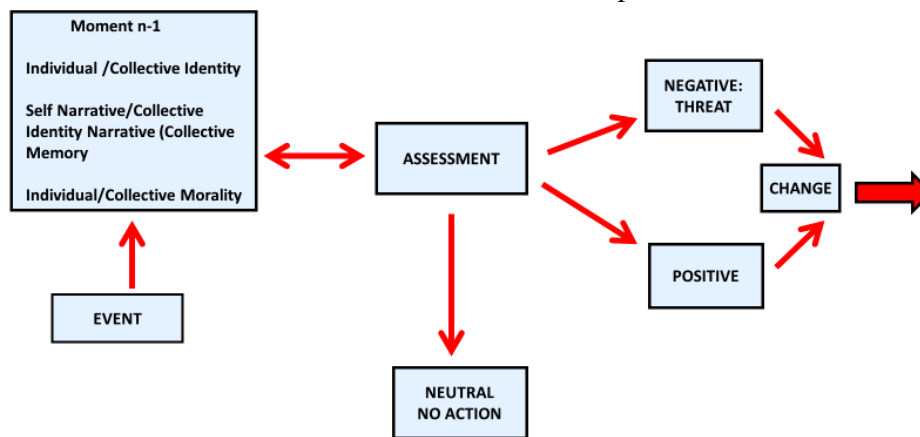


Fig. 1. Decisions involved in the maintenance of identity

Collective identity, be it group, ethnic, religious, ideological or national (or combinations of the above) is part of individual identity. The social factors involved in defining the moral norms and in creating and maintaining the individual identity provide the linkage mechanisms between individual and collective identities. Morality, by definition, shapes interpersonal behavior, first by creating an internalized moral code that is culturally defined, and second by providing the basis for supervision and feedback by others in the community. In turn, the norms and values shared by the community shape the public sphere and determine which topics can be discussed within it.

Todorov (2004) described collective memory as “not a memory per se, but a discourse that takes place in the public sphere, which reflects the self-image that a society or a group within the society tries to project” (author’s translation, p. 41). Collective memory is a consensual convention which allows for the integration of recalled events in a manner consistent with the existing narrative and the rejection of events

not consistent with it. The same cognitive distortion mechanisms are used at individual and collective levels. Taken together these strategies facilitate the construction of a false but coherent version of past events, which is then used to interpret and integrate present events.

The integrity and consistency of individual identity are the validated by interaction with others. However, what constitutes a check on the validity of collective memory/group identity? If a fact affirmed by another group is seen positively, its integration in the collective memory is conflict free. However, if a fact liked by the group in question is contested by other groups, or a fact disliked by the group is affirmed by other groups, confrontation occurs because the challenge is constructed as a narcissistic injury, a threat to the group identity itself. Like in the case of individual identity, self-consistency is more important than objective reality, and the brain rewards you more for it.

In the case of individual identity, information that is discrepant with the narrative of the self is repressed. Aside from validation by others and self-consistency, repression, guilt, and shame are the internal control mechanisms. In the case of collective memory repression takes the form of willful ignorance, "ignorance as an active construct" (Proctor, 2008, p. 85), ignorance "made, maintained and manipulated... (so) that certain people don't want you to know certain things, or will actively work to organize doubt or uncertainty or misinformation to help maintain (your) ignorance. They know and may or may not want you to know they know." The effect is the relegation of questionable issues outside the public sphere, so they cannot be debated. Discrepant information that challenges the conventional truth is met with anger and aggression.

The public sphere is also influenced by the individual strategies needed to adapt to society, more so in the case of societies with a totalitarian past. Milgram's obedience to authority, Janis' groupthink, Lifton's psychic numbing and doubling, Orwellian doublethink, Milosz' ketman and self-deception are a few examples. The internal cohesion of the group is assured by self-censorship and those who are opposed to it are punished. Once the value system has been internalized, the individual becomes a de facto enforcer of conformity.

In turn this leads to the repositioning of the Overton window, which defines the range of acceptable behaviors in a given situation. The window “slides” up or down, modifying the range of behaviors:

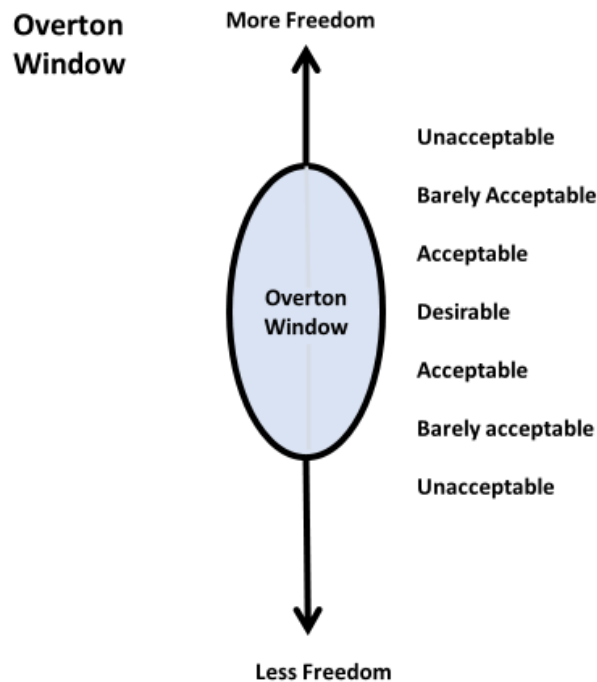
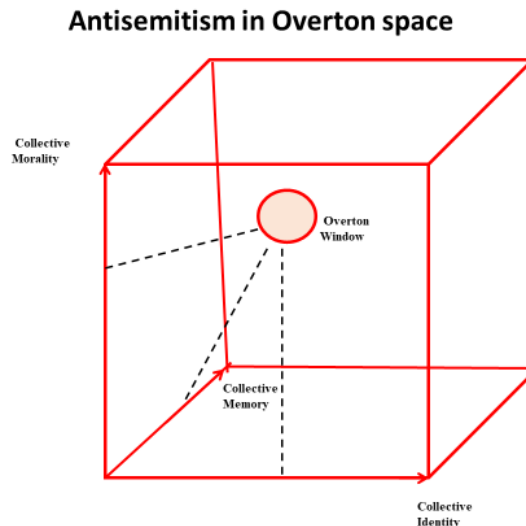


Fig. 2. The Overton Window

In a previous work (Dan, 2017), I proposed the concept of a tri-dimensional Overton space, which allows for a better representation of the factors involved in repositioning the window. For example this is a representation of the Overton window for antisemitism. The degree of antisemitism increases along all the axes; the position of the window depends on the degree of antisemitism on each axis.





*Fig. 3. antisemitism in Overton space*

I believe that populism is a process similar to a permanent revolution, and the states undergoing it are essentially unstable. As Dasgupta (2018) argues, the populist revolution does not stop with the restoration of the nation state, but causes continuing fragmentation and tribalization. The present-day leaders must avoid at all cost being perceived as “elite” and a force for status quo, and they try to amplify the nationalist and isolationist message in an effort to stay in power and achieve a degree of stability. In fact one could argue that the resurgence of antisemitism is the logical and unavoidable consequence of right wing populism. The characteristics of populism described by Mudde: authoritarianism, nativism and anti-elitism facilitate the adoption and dissemination of antisemitic ideas. Of the three axes the easiest to manipulate is collective memory. There are, in fact many mechanisms that enforce conformity with the collective memory of the group. The most general of those is what the citizens of Athens called “*mnesikakein*,” an oath not to remember past wrongdoing. For a modern version see Spain’s “*pacto de olivado*” regarding the Civil War. Coman, Stone et al. (2014) have shown that trying to justify atrocities committed in war alters the memories of those who committed them.

Coman summarized the findings for Science daily: "What we learn from this research is that moral disengagement strategies are fundamentally altering our memories... More specifically, these strategies affect the degree to which our memories are influenced by the conversations we have with one another" (2014, p. 1). Coman, Momennejad *et al* (2016) also found that those sharing memories of an event tend to synchronize them. Since collective memory is shared, this means that it tends to become more and more self-consistent.

Antisemitism can be considered a self-referential and self-justifying group of axioms supported by memes which are integrated in larger belief systems such as religion or nationalism. The message being transmitted is the evil represented by the Jews. This information gets converted into a moral principle, allowing the holder of antisemitic beliefs to be free of cognitive dissonance.

Bering described a number of core antisemitic beliefs which can be considered memes: "Jews are bad by nature," "The bad traits of the Jews are incorrigible," "Jews must be seen as a group, not as individuals," "Jews remain essentially alien," "Jews bring disaster to their 'host societies,'" "Jews are secretive," "Jews are part of a conspiracy." (1992, p. 76)

Please note that the above beliefs have been stripped of any religious connotation and can be passed on as folk wisdom under the heading "what everyone knows about the Jews."

Lifton (1983) coined the term "thought stopping cliché" to describe the use of commonly used phrases to defuse cognitive dissonance and quiet dissent: "The most far-reaching and complex of human problems are compressed into brief, highly reductive, definitive-sounding phrases, easily memorized and easily expressed. These become the start and finish of any ideological analysis," (p. 173). What I am proposing is that the antisemitic memes are such "thought stopping clichés," not subject to debate or analysis, easily reproduced and replicated, embedded in value systems that help to maintain them, dissimulate them and transmit them. The way in which they spread is similar to a computer virus: self-replicating, able to develop defenses and mutate, distorting the value systems that host them in order to accommodate and propagate themselves. They are easily assimilated into the collective memory of nations undergoing a shift to right wing populism resulting

in a resurgence of antisemitism. Once the collective memory is modified, it modifies the collective identity as well, creating a narrative of having been victimized by the actions of Jews.

Gazzaniga (2010) has argued that our actions must make sense to ourselves. He posited the existence of a brain structure he named “the interpreter” whose function is to ensure that we understand our actions, which must also conform to the internalized behavior code. Similarly, at the group level, the actions taken have to be consistent with the group’s identity, collective memory, and shared morality. However, as Westen (2008) has demonstrated validation is by emotional congruence rather than cognitive consistency. The portrayal of Jews as an existential threat, and of host nation as a victim, activates the Contempt-Anger-Disgust system (Rozin *et al*, 1999) and morally sanctions violence against them, leading to the repositioning of the Overton window regarding actions that can be taken against Jews.

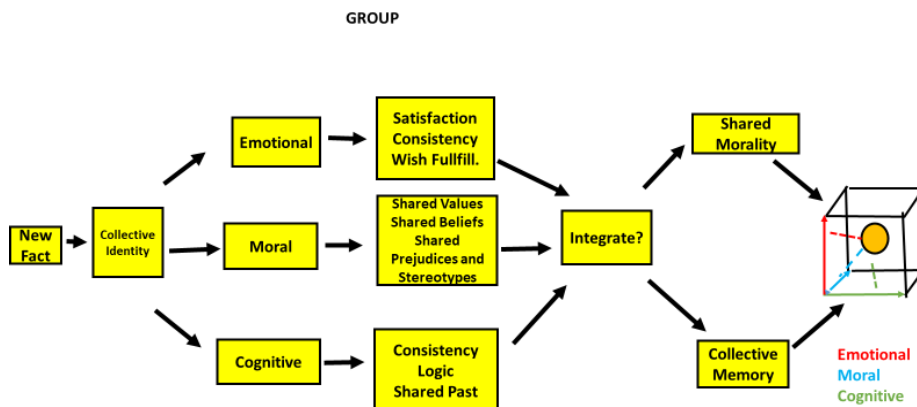


Fig. 4. The repositioning of the Overton window

The resurgence of antisemitism has led to a re-writing of different nations’ participation in the Holocaust and the reinterpretation of the respective nation’s fascist past. Poland has recently adopted a law making the attribution of responsibility for or complicity during the Holocaust to the Polish nation or state a crime. This overlooks documented massacres such as Jedwabne or the work of Polish/Canadian historian Grabowski (2013), which attributed to Poles

responsibility for the deaths of at least 200,000 Jews. Slovakia, Romania, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary are also actively involved in an effort to falsify their history.

As affirmed earlier, rejection of a significant event by not including it in the collective memory is achieved through willful ignorance. This has the effect of excluding the subject from the dialogue taking place in the public sphere. The process through which certain topics become taboo is similar to the one through which censorship becomes self-censorship, progressing from the silencing of public speech to exclusion from the collective memory. For example, the discussion of the Romanian role in the Holocaust was made impossible because as the Final Report of the Wiesel Commission notes, the official and definitive communist version of history, Roller's "History of Romania", replaced Jews and Roma... with communists and Romanians, as the main victims of fascism and ignored antisemitism as a defining trait of Antonescu's dictatorship" (p.8). The official Romanian strategy in the communist and post-communist periods alike has been described by the Wiesel Commission (2005) as "selective negationism"; not a denial of the Holocaust per se, but a denial that Romania had a role in it. Shafir (2002) has identified several types of negationism used by countries which have participated in the Holocaust and try to deflect the guilt without denying the Holocaust outright.

The role played by the fascist Iron Guard movement (the Legionnaires) is also subject to revisionism and negationism. More recently, the controversy surrounding the adoption of Law no. 217/2015 ("for the **modification and completion of Emergency Governmental Ordinance no. 31/2002** regarding the banning of organizations and symbols with fascist, racist or xenophobic character and the promotion of the cult of persons guilty of crimes against peace and mankind") commonly referred to as the "anti-Legionnaire law" has laid bare the essence of the conflict: Present day right wing sympathizers feel that the law punishes "anti-communist fighters" and insist that a similar law banning the denial of the crimes and the promotion of the symbols of communism be promulgated. Furthermore, they insist that the same law should prohibit the negation of Holocaust and the negation of the crimes of communism, as well as the promotion of the symbols of either

movement. What lies behind this reaction is the effort to draw a false moral equivalency between the Holocaust and the crimes of communism, trying to use the latter to justify the Holocaust post hoc by emphasizing the role of Jews in the communist nomenclature. The fight around this issue has a ritualistic aspect: A significant figure of the Iron Guard movement is being honored; the Wiesel Institute protests, an attempt at whitewashing the record follows, and a protracted conflict ensues. This pattern is by no means limited to Romania. In Croatia the appointment of cabinet minister Hasabegovic, a known denier of the atrocities committed by the “Ustasha” regime during WWII, has provoked a protest by the Simon Wiesenthal Institute. In neighboring Hungary the controversy regarding the erecting of a bust of noted antisemite Balint Homan in Székesfehérvár followed a similar trajectory and it took an intervention of the US to stop it. (“It’s why, when a statue of an antisemitic leader from World War II was planned in Hungary, we led the charge to convince their government to reverse course... This was not a side note to our relations with Hungary, this was central to maintaining a good relationship with the United States, and we let them know,” President Obama, in a speech at the Israeli embassy on Holocaust Remembrance Day, January 27, 2016). This was followed by an almost identical incident in Budapest regarding the unveiling of the bust of Gyorgy Donat, another antisemitic politician.

The same conflict is also fought under different disguises: criticizing the pro Iron Guard “golden generation” of intellectuals, criticizing “the memory of Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran, Mircea Vulcanescu, Vintila Horia, Nechifor Crainic or Mihai Manolescu is considered a sacrilege, a crime of *lese-majeste*. From that moment on public dialogue is impossible” (Florin, 2018, p. 179). The Romanian right is also involved in a massive public relations action aimed at rehabilitating Marshall Antonescu. As Cazan (2018) demonstrates, the majority of prominent Romanian historians either support this effort or are equivocating. At the same time narratives that run counter to the rightist trend are attacked as being anti-Romanian.

Examples include the reaction to the book of Manu and Buzdughina, which disproved the claim that virulent antisemite and Iron Guard ideologue Nicolae Paulescu was “robbed” of the Nobel prize

for medicine, the reaction to Radu Ioanid's book and interviews about the Romanian participation in the Holocaust, the reaction to the work of Adrian Cioflanca, which uncovers new evidence of mass killings of Jews perpetrated by Romanian troops during WWII, or the reaction to Florin Iepan's documentary regarding the atrocities committed by the Romanian troops in Odessa and Radu Jude's film "The dead country." Each of the above was labeled "anti-Romanian" because they challenged the conventional wisdom and punctured sacred cows, challenging the collective memory narrative. Norman Manea's (1994) essay "Felix Culpa" regarding Eliade's lack of public repentance about his support for the Iron Guard was met with sharp criticism from the intellectuals of "the new Romanian right" and with antisemitic slurs and thinly veiled threats.

In Hungary, the obsession with George Soros' influence has reached levels of paranoia which seem to come right out of George Orwell's 1984. The Orban government uses Soros as a straw man, a stand in for the world-wide Jewish conspiracy, and by extension, an excuse for its raw antisemitism. It also uses the Soros connection to attack the Central European University, a rare beacon of freedom in an increasingly authoritarian Hungary. As Mudde (2017) has noted, Orban's provocations may force the European Union to finally take action. As it stands, the infection is spreading and other countries, for example Poland adopted discriminatory policies.



*Fig. 5. Anti Soros posters in the Budapest subway*



Fig. 6. Poster combining Soros as a puppeteer with a Nazi antisemitic poster

I would be remiss if I did not mention that in England, after right wing populist movement led to Brexit, there was an explosion of antisemitism in the left leaning Labor party. The de-facto leader, Jeremy Corbin, as well as Labor members of the House of Commons made blatantly antisemitic statements, thinly disguised as criticisms of Israel, followed by utterly unconvincing apologies. This only proves that the disinhibition of racist, xenophobic and nationalistic attitudes brought forth by populism find fertile ground in both left leaning and right leaning ideologies.

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